

## **“Joseph and Billy”**

Genesis 50:15-21; Romans 14:7-12

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

July 22, 2018 – 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost - Rev. Ronald W. Botts

Today let me tell you about Billy, who was ten and our first foster child. For one that young Billy had been in enough trouble that he was made a ward of the juvenile court. He definitely had an "attitude" problem along with an extensive vocabulary of four-letter words which he would trot out quite regularly. Billy was already a regular smoker, though he had that habit crimped with us. He didn't like school and was failing in all his subjects.

On the other side of the ledger Billy was good-looking and could be as charming as any child of that age. His IQ was 139, well above average. Sometimes he would even let that “tough guy” projection slip a bit. I recall one night when I read him a story and he sat there next to me on the couch, head on my shoulder, as he fell asleep. No matter how hardened the image he tried to project, there was still a little boy at the core.

Billy's confident exterior was really a cover-up for insecurity and self-doubts. The more I came to know about his background, the more I understood why he probably felt the way he did and why he behaved accordingly.

His parents were divorced while he was very young, primarily because of his mother's alcoholism. His father was given custody of Billy and his mother rarely saw him even though she lived nearby. In time his father remarried and so Billy then lived with his father and step-mother. After a while things soured in that relationship, too.

Billy's father felt he couldn't handle the responsibility for two growing boys at this point in his life, so he gave Billy and his brother over to his new wife from whom he was separating.

A year later, and not long before he came to us, Billy's step-mother married her live-in boyfriend. So the boys ended up living with a step-mother and a step-father, though their real parents were still in the area. Billy bounced around like a ping pong ball between persons who didn't want him, or had too many problems of their own to really function as parents. How could this not affect a child's life?

Now at that time the juvenile judge, the only one in our rural county, felt that an effective technique for reforming children was to make public the decisions of his court. Though he was dealing with youth, he made no effort to protect their identity or their situation. He was of the opinion that they could be shamed into changing. If that method was ever successful, it's unlikely it would have been with kids whose ego strength was very fragile.

When Billy went to court at age ten, both the hearing and its outcome was reported in the local newspaper, including his curfew time and all his reporting requirements. In a small town everybody reads the paper cover-to-cover, so the court news can hardly be missed. Unlike a city and its anonymity, sometimes people know too much about each other's business.

We had high hopes when Billy came to live with us that it would allow him to make a new start. We were committed to providing the most supportive home we could. He would be in a new school and we felt optimistic when he went off to the elementary just a few blocks away. We packed his lunch with an extra brownie for that first day and gave him a hug.

I came back from the church early that Monday so that I could be home when Billy returned from school. I could see, however, that there was something wrong just the way he was walking slowly down the sidewalk, alone, with his eyes cast downward.

I asked him what happened, but he didn't say anything at first. Finally, he looked up at me and said, "On the playground hardly any kids would play with me. They said their mothers saw my name in the newspaper and to stay away from me. They said I was bad." And with that, a single tear came down and streaked his cheek.

Perhaps other parents meant well and only tried to look out for their own, but that day some truly sat in judgment of a little boy who could be good, and wanted to be. They took the scant information they had, deemed him "incorrigible," and crushed the new spark of life trying to build within him. On that day he had a negative label put on him and it was uphill from there for the rest of the time he was with us.

Judgment is most often an unloving act. It is not intended to bring about change, but to categorize persons, lock them in a box, and have done with them. By making sweeping assessments, often on limited information, the issue is closed and finished. There's a basic unfairness, however, in seeing something from just one vantage point and assuming that you understand the whole situation. This was how those parents—some of whom were our neighbors—dealt with little Billy, and it hurt him deeply. They never took the time to get to know him, much less to try to understand him and give him a chance.

Now our Old Testament lesson for today comes from the story of Jacob and his sons. It was a large family, yet of all his sons, Jacob loved his youngest son the most for he was born to him in his old age. The other sons were aware of their father's special affection for Joseph. In fact, the more their father loved Joseph, the more they resented their brother. Joseph had never wished them harm, but this didn't matter. His intentions were not at issue. Their argument was not really with him, but with the father; their anger, however, fell on their sibling. So they criticized him and sought his downfall.

It wasn't Joseph's fault that his father loved him so much. He didn't do anything to lord it over his brothers. He didn't flaunt his father's favor before them. He simply accepted it for the fact it was. He loved his father in return and there was a closeness which couldn't be denied.

So it was that those jealous brothers sold Joseph into slavery to a band of itinerant traders, who eventually transported the young man to Egypt and resold him there. He was now a piece of merchandise and treated as such. The brothers laid a sentence on the youngest sibling and deemed him expendable.

Which one of us hasn't been judged unfairly at some time. Our particular circumstances may not be like Joseph's or that of Billy's, but the hurt was probably the same. Even when our actions could rightly be called into question, we are still deeply wounded whenever another

passes hasty judgment on us at any age. Frequently it's over and done with before we can even influence that decision. We're struck with the outcome even though it's blatantly unfair.

Judgment is painful and affects a person immediately; its scars can go deep and remain for a lifetime. When such assessments are made while we're young like Billy, the memory may linger in our subconscious to damage our sense of self-worth and ability.

A university once did a revealing experiment in an inner-city school. The intent of the study was known only to the principal and not to any of the teachers. What the investigators did was to give all the children a test for aptitude and abilities, but they put aside the results. The researchers then divided the children randomly into new classes, and told the teachers they either had a room full of children with potential and promise or ones who were below average and limited.

At the end of the school year it turned out that the children labeled "promising" were just that. These particular classes were showing high success and the teachers generally found great satisfaction with their supposedly "gifted" kids. They continually reinforced in their pupils a likelihood of achievement and possibility.

On the other hand, the "limited potential" classes scored significantly lower on the final test given everyone at the end of the year. There was a much bleaker atmosphere in these classrooms and the teachers reported they were less fulfilled in their work. They couldn't wait for the year to be over.

Remember, though, the difference wasn't in the cross-section of children in each class, for it was randomly generated. The difference was in the **labels** that were placed on them. Here it was shown that expectations correlated closely with success or failure, both for the students and teachers.

Our biblical story, in the end, shows that Joseph's brothers sorely misjudged him. Later they were reunited in Egypt and it was he who kept them alive in a time of famine, for Joseph had become powerful in his adopted country.

The prior actions of the brothers might have been considered unpardonable, but Joseph had in him a capacity of forgiveness for even such a grievous wrong. Maybe it was the love of his father for him that allowed Joseph to love those brothers who had hurt him so much.

Thinking back now, we had Billy with us for just five months and then he was returned to the only place the Court could send him: with his step-mother and step-father. He went to another county and I lost track of Billy after that. He had great potential, but that didn't guarantee anything.

What I learned from this brief chapter in my life is that much harm can result from judgments that are casually made about other persons without taking time to know them and their situation. I also began to realize that how we are perceived by others is how we tend to become—and that can be for good or for bad.

When we make an effort to truly know others, we may find that we really share much in common. Likewise, when we rush to judge someone's life and intentions, we are prone to

error. We would do well to consider Paul's advice to refrain from hasty conclusions and allow judgment to be the Lord's, for only God can see fully into the crevices of the human heart.

When we recognize that all of us make mistakes and sin, we can more readily give the benefit of doubt to others that we would also wish from them. And bad boys, when shown love, can frequently grow up to become good men because others cared and helped them to believe in themselves.